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HEADLINE: CITY LAUNCHES PILOT SCHOOL FOR TECHNOLOGY

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BODY:

Boston's new pilot high school has only 75 students and a temporary home, but its humble start belies the high-stakes nature of an experiment that officials hope will become a model for the future.

Yesterday, before a host of dignitaries, including Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino and state Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll, **TechBoston** Academy officially opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, speeches, and a subtle but direct challenge to its student body.

"This school is about the dream of ed reform, which is the engagement of students so they can meet a higher standard," Driscoll said. "We are going to be watching you, because this is going to be a national laboratory."

TechBoston, which opened its doors to students last month, is the first school in the city to combine the most significant elements of Boston's high school reforms - cutting-edge technology and small class sizes in all academic subjects. If it succeeds, the school could be the new model for high schools in the district and across Massachusetts.

Like many districts nationwide, Boston has started breaking down its high schools into smaller learning communities, based on data indicating that some students fall through the cracks in larger schools.

At **TechBoston**, however, the faculty-to-student ratio is 1 to 4, said city officials, allowing for a more individual approach to education. And while students at conventional high schools are forced to share computers, each **TechBoston** student is assigned a top-of-the-line laptop for classwork, courtesy of Dell Computer Corp.

Still, the new school is widely viewed as an experiment, with a lot riding on the results.

Even as parents and administrators celebrated **TechBoston's** debut, city officials are still scrambling to find the money to secure the school's future.

After a \$31 million School Department budget shortfall threatened to delay **TechBoston's** opening, two nonprofits - the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Boston Foundation - gave the district \$600,000 to launch the school on time. The district later kicked in the balance of \$50,000 needed to run the new school.

Officials could have postponed the opening until the school's budget was more stable, but "they did a great and risky thing," Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, told the students. But he reminded them there was much at stake.

"There's a big obligation for you to make this work, so don't screw it up," he said with a wink.

Despite dire predictions that the school district budget will be even tighter next academic year, Schools Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant pledged to make sure **TechBoston** does not remain an experiment.

"We can't let anything get in the way of moving this forward," he said. "We are going to try to get as much outside support as we can."

In addition to the laptops, more than 20 other technology companies - including IBM, Intel, Microsoft, and Toshiba - donated more than \$1 million worth of equipment.

School officials also hope they can find a permanent home for **TechBoston** in Roxbury or Dorchester. Until then, the Taft Middle School in Brighton, which is being phased out to create more seats for the city's booming high school population, will host the new school.

Eventually, administrators will add new grades to **TechBoston**, with up to 300 students joining the school in the next four years.